

HUMANITARIANISM, TESTIMONY, AND THE WHITE SAVIOR INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

WHAT IS THE WHAT VERSUS KONY 2012

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This article examines two instances of human rights advocacy—Dave Eggers’s *What Is the What* (2006) and Invisible Children’s *Kony 2012*—that have attracted a great deal of attention in recent years. It aims to show how the former exposes and challenges the neocolonial assumptions underlying humanitarian campaigns such as *Kony 2012* as well as how they are emblematic of different forms of engagement with subaltern testimonies established by humanitarian activists in the postcolonial era. *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng—A Novel* constitutes a fascinating and at times confusing instance of literary ventriloquism. It has garnered significant popular and critical interest for its unusual collaborative testimonial account, which, as the subtitle suggests, fuses the genres of the novel and autobiography. The book tells the story of one of the “Lost Boys” of Sudan: children who were made homeless by the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005), which forced them to flee across vast unforgiving territories before being considered for resettlement in the United States by aid organizations. *What Is the What* testifies to Deng’s traumatic experiences in war-torn Sudan within a frame narrative centering on a violent robbery he suffers in his Atlanta apartment. While the book has been widely praised, some critics have addressed the perceived shortcomings and flaws of the product of Eggers and Deng’s collaboration.

Criticisms of *What Is the What* concentrate on the issues of voice appropriation, identity erasure, and neocolonial imperialism in relation to the role of testimony in human rights advocacy. As our analysis will reveal, however, the accusations leveled at *What Is the What* apply much more plausibly to the online video campaign *Kony 2012*, which went viral in March 2012. The latter is part of an ongoing humanitarian

effort by the American-based nonprofit organization Invisible Children to apprehend the African warlord Joseph Kony, who leads a rebel group called the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), and to alleviate the suffering of those affected by the LRA conflict. Kony's militia has terrorized several Central African states over the past decades, including Uganda, which is the focus of the *Kony 2012* video. Atrocities resulting from the LRA conflict include the killing of civilians, abductions of young children and their subsequent use as child soldiers, and the mass displacement of peoples across Uganda, the Central African Republic, (South) Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The video's appeal revolves around the personal story of Jason Russell, an American activist who visited parts of Uganda that were particularly badly affected by Kony's militia, and specifically emphasizes the personal connection he formed with a recovering child soldier, Jacob Acaye. In its campaign, Invisible Children uses the victim's testimony in order to recruit and mobilize a legion of activists to help arrest Kony and bring him before the International Criminal Court (ICC) to face thirty-three charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

What Is the What and *Kony 2012* invite comparison in that they are both recent high-profile instances of collaborative testimonial accounts focused on African humanitarian crises predominantly aimed at a Western, and more specifically, American, audience.¹ An analysis of the former in terms of genre will reveal how Eggers's narrative encourages readers to develop a form of guarded empathy that allows them to inhabit Deng's traumatic experiences without appropriating them. In contrast, *Kony 2012* portrays a Western activist who not only over-identifies with the traumatic situation of a recovering child soldier but appropriates his victimhood in the portrayal of his plight in Invisible Children's humanitarian campaign. As a result, the video leads the viewer to establish an empathic relationship with the Western humanitarian agent rather than the African victim, consigning the latter to the position of a silenced and ultimately unknown object of patronizing sympathy.

We will go on to consider the wider sociopolitical implications of the use of testimonies within human rights discourses, exploring the ethical questions relating to the various kinds of dialogue collaborative testimonial accounts can foster between the West and the subaltern in their advocacy of human rights. *Kony 2012* constitutes a teleological

and redemptive narrative in which the protagonist, an American human rights activist, seeks to gain support for his cause by relating his travails in a deprived, inferior, and homogeneous “Third World” before resuming his safe and protected life in the United States. This foray into the Global South subsequently allows him to champion the natives’ development on the basis of a shared humanity that remains blind to existing structural inequalities and fails to challenge neocolonial power relations. Taken together with the campaign’s specific goal of apprehending Kony, portrayed by Invisible Children as the single source of evil against which activists struggle, this makes *Kony 2012* symptomatic of what Teju Cole has wryly called the “White Savior Industrial Complex.” By contrast, *What Is the What* refuses both redemption and teleology in its structure, urging the reader instead to engage with the victim’s particular identity on the basis of an egalitarian transnational awareness that eschews any grounding in the neocolonial master narratives to which *Kony 2012* is indebted.

TESTIMONY AS HUMANITARIAN ACTIVISM

It is important to understand the genesis, form, and content of both *What Is the What* and *Kony 2012* in order to be able to compare them adequately. In an essay titled “It Was Just Boys Walking,” which appeared in the *Guardian* on May 26, 2007, Eggers reflects at length on the genesis of the book. His cooperation with Deng, he explains, began in 2002 when Mary Williams of the Lost Boy Foundation contacted Eggers on behalf of Deng, asking him to help Deng tell his story to a broader Western audience. The revised preface of later editions of the book further explicates that they agreed that all proceeds from the publication would go to Deng (xiv).² Deng decided in 2006 to set up the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation, a nonprofit organization that, according to its website, seeks to “increase access to education in post-conflict South Sudan by building schools, libraries, teacher-training institutes, and community centers” (“Home”). As such, this testimonial account serves the dual purpose of disseminating the victim’s testimony and gathering funds for a humanitarian effort in South Sudan. Eggers and Deng’s self-proclaimed novel and autobiography is the former’s narrativization of the latter’s life story, with the preface being

the only section of the text written solely by Deng. Elizabeth Twitchell points out that the narrative proper is narrated in the first person by a fictional “third voice” that coincides neither with Deng’s nor with Eggers’s voice, and which she calls “Valentino.” This third voice resembles the actual “Deng’s speaking voice but does not reproduce or transcribe it” (Twitchell, 638). We will maintain this useful distinction between Valentino and Deng in our further analysis of *What Is the What*.

Valentino’s story is structured around a frame narrative spanning two consecutive days in which the protagonist becomes the victim of a violent robbery by two African Americans in his Atlanta apartment. Afterward, he fruitlessly seeks assistance from the police and medical attention from a local hospital. Throughout this account of present-day suffering, however, the reader is informed of Valentino’s childhood experiences of the Second Sudanese Civil War, which began after racial and religious tensions between the oil-rich non-Islamic south of the country and the Arab-dominated north reached breaking point. The Khartoum government’s imposition of Shari’a law on the country’s entire population triggered a conflict between the government and a rebel movement in the south of the country, the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM), and its military arm, the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA). This conflict, which lasted until 2005, claimed two and a half million lives and displaced another four million people (Deng 2008, xiv).

Valentino describes his experience of this civil war and his life in several refugee camps in the form of interior monologues or “silent stories” (Eggers 2008, 29)³ directed at uninterested characters within the narrative: Michael, the young boy who is left to guard him as he lies gagged and bound on his apartment floor; Julian, a hospital warden who keeps him waiting for hours; and the customers at the fitness club where he works as a receptionist. The fact that these characters refuse to listen acts as a powerful incentive for the reader to recognize and empathize with Deng. As a reader, one sees that Valentino’s unwilling interlocutors, by ignoring him entirely or merely acknowledging his presence but not his testimony, effectively deny him his claim to a distinctive identity. Valentino reflects on the importance of his narrative being received by directly addressing his readers in the closing lines of *What Is the What*:

I have spoken to every person I have encountered these last difficult days, . . . because to do anything else would be something less than human. I speak to these people, and I speak to you because I cannot help it. . . . I covet your eyes, your ears, the collapsible space between us. . . . How can I pretend that you do not exist? It would be almost as impossible as you pretending that I do not exist. (535)

Even though Valentino's story essentially tracks the events of Deng's life, the narrative was largely constructed by Eggers, who is listed as the sole author on the book's title page. Indeed, it was his idea to use the robbery in Atlanta as a framing device for the narrative (Eggers 2007a), an important structural feature that contributes significantly to the antiteleological thrust of the narrative. Moreover, readers of Eggers's breakthrough fictionalized memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, recognize the self-conscious style of narration that, in *What Is the What*, manifests itself in Valentino's constant reflections on how certain aspects of his narrative will be perceived by his uninterested interlocutors and, indirectly, his Western readership. Consider by way of example Valentino's worrying over what Michael must think of the astonished and confused reactions from Valentino and his friends when one Sudanese man purchases a bicycle and muses on whether he should remove the plastic wrapping before use: "TV boy [Michael], you are no doubt thinking that we're absurdly primitive people, that a village that doesn't know whether to remove the plastic from a bicycle—that such a place would of course be vulnerable to attack, to famine and any other calamity" (40). In this way, in addition to its being a testimony to the Sudanese humanitarian crisis that resulted in the establishment of the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation, Eggers distinguishes his work from traditional testimonial accounts through such self-conscious reflections on what it represents as well as by writing Deng's account through the fictionalized narrative voice of Valentino.

The *Kony 2012* online video similarly employs a testimonial account to raise awareness for a humanitarian campaign, in this case to encourage Western leaders to step up their efforts to apprehend Kony, as well as to aid affected communities and rehabilitate child soldiers who were part of the LRA. In the video, the American filmmaker and humanitarian activist Jason Russell explains how he personally witnessed the devastation caused to people's lives and entire communities by Kony's militia, which includes vast numbers of abducted children serving as

child soldiers. The broad humanitarian crisis related to the LRA is presented through the specific connection Russell develops with an ex-child soldier in Uganda who escaped the LRA, Acaye, and Russell's juxtaposed attempt at explaining the urgency of the situation to his own son Gavin.⁴ The intended effect is to establish an obvious similarity between Acaye and Russell's son on the basis of their shared humanity, while emphasizing their tremendous difference in terms of poverty and privilege. There are examples galore of this appeal to a shared humanity. The clearest example is when the birth of an American child, Gavin Russell, is shown accompanied by the words: "Every single person in the world started this way. He didn't choose where or when he was born, but because he's here, he matters." On the basis of human rights and its key principle of a shared humanity, *Kony 2012* attempts to sensitize its Western viewers to the suffering in African countries such as Uganda.⁵ While one may well wonder at the fact that a humanitarian organization emphasizes a large-scale manhunt over the alleviation of suffering, *Kony 2012*'s testimony is akin to the collaborative testimony of Eggers and Deng at least in that it foregrounds the relationship between an American activist, Russell, and an African victim, Acaye.

READING THE UNSETTLING MIDDLE VOICE

In comparing the types of collaborative testimonies provided by *Kony 2012* and *What Is the What*, it is important to consider the two inter-related issues of voice (appropriation) and identity. This discussion will be helped by a thorough understanding of the complex interplay of genres in *What Is the What*. Eggers's work hovers between the genres of the novel, biography / autobiography, and the testimonial narrative. Each of these genres must be taken into account in order to understand fully how Eggers's narrative works. As Brian Yost notes in "The Voices of Others: Dave Eggers and New Directions for Testimony Narrative and Cosmopolitan Literary Collaboration," the collaboration between Eggers and Deng suggests a direct link between *What Is the What* and the tradition of the *testimonio* genre (149).⁶ *Testimonio* narratives, as written in the tradition of texts testifying to humanitarian issues in Central America, are the product of a collaborative process in which a privileged outsider helps to write the account of a victim's life in

order to make it accessible to a wider audience. The humanitarian potential of *testimonio* literature forms the central hypothesis of Kimberley Nance's *Can Literature Promote Justice? Trauma Narrative and Social Action in Latin American Testimonio*, which explores the interconnectedness of the form, humanitarian intent, and ideological background of collaborative testimonial narratives. Important to note here is how in the *testimonio* genre the victim's narrative is facilitated and implicitly corroborated by the Western author. In an older testimonial tradition, that of the nineteenth-century African American slave narrative, the white author would even explicitly authorize the former slave's account in the preface for the benefit of the predominantly white readership. Consider, by way of example, the double verification of events in Harriet Ann Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. The preface by the black author—Harriet Ann Jacobs—begins: "Reader be assured this narrative is no fiction" (5). However, the veracity of both the preface and the narrative are corroborated by Lydia Maria Child, a white American abolitionist, in an editor's preface that states: "The author of the following autobiography is personally known to me, and her conversation and manners inspire me with confidence" (5). There is a clear similarity with both of these traditions of collaborative testimony as *What Is the What* sees an established Western author, Dave Eggers, compose the story of a disempowered African, the Sudanese "Lost Boy" Valentino Achak Deng. However, *What Is the What* not only invokes but also inverts the conventions of *testimonio* and the slave narrative by having Deng testify to the veracity of Eggers's text in the preface (Peek, 119). Importantly, therefore, this is a testimonial narrative where the privileged author has ceded control to the disenfranchised, both financially—as noted before—and narratologically. This role reversal in the preface is a testament to the extent to which Eggers and Deng are aware of the potentially hierarchical and neocolonial relationship their collaborative testimony could entail, in which a white, middle-class American author helps articulate a disempowered Sudanese man's testimony. Further in line with the humanitarian intent of the testimonial narrative, the preface emphasizes its didactic mission. This manifests itself in the text as Deng initially granting *What Is the What* his blessing by stating that it is "the soulful account of [his] life" (xiii), before drawing the reader's attention to the pedagogical purpose of the text: "As you read this book, you will learn about me and my beloved people of Sudan" (xiii).

Additionally, given the emphasis on this being an accurate account of his life,⁷ *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng* crosses into the territory of the genres of biography and autobiography. The title explicitly links it to the latter, whereas Eggers's role as the writer of Deng's life story invokes the former. Given that the text brands itself as an *autobiography* rather than a biography, the otherwise strictly divided roles of the subject (Deng) and the biographer (Eggers) are intentionally blurred. Hence, the reader is unable to pin down the authorial voice as being strictly Eggers or entirely Deng, forcing him or her to hear instead the in-between voice of Valentino.

Further deepening the generic ambiguity is the fact that *What Is the What* is also fiction, by its own admission on the title page as well as in the (revised) preface: "It should be known to the readers that I was very young when some of the events in the book took place, and as a result we simply had to pronounce *What Is the What* a novel" (Deng 2008, xiv).⁸ While the admission that part of the protagonist's life in the narrative is fictional breaks the "autobiographical pact" with the reader influentially defined by Philippe Lejeune in *On Autobiography* as guaranteeing the actuality of an autobiography's subject, it also exemplifies the unresolvable tension between fiction and autobiography explored by Paul de Man in the essay "Autobiography as Defacement," his response to Lejeune. De Man posits that the pact between the reader and the text's subject is in fact one of "mutually reflexive substitution" that serves to corroborate subjectivity (921). In other words, de Man suggests that the autobiographical subject is neither strictly real, as Lejeune's contract suggests, nor entirely fictional, but is instead the product of a collaborative process between the text and the reader. Accordingly, by embracing the ambiguous space between fact and fiction, Eggers encourages readers to become part of a mutually defining relationship with Deng based on their entering into a dialogue with the fictionalized voice of Valentino. As a novel, *What Is the What* is able to appeal specifically to the reader's imagination when engaging with the text. Indeed, Valentino stresses the importance of readers imaginatively engaging with his testimony in order to further the humanitarian aims of the text as a whole in a reflection on his interior monologues: "You [the uninterested interlocutor] *would not add to my suffering if you knew what I have seen*. And until that person left my sight, I would tell them about Deng [a friend of Valentino's],

who died after eating elephant meat . . . or about Ahok and Awach Ugieth, twin sisters who were carried off by Arab horsemen. . . . *Do you have any idea? . . . Can you imagine this?*" (29). Consider also the choice of words when Valentino silently addresses Michael, telling the boy of his Sudanese experiences: "Be grateful, TV Boy. Have respect. Have you seen the beginning of a war? *Picture* your neighborhood, and now *see* the women screaming, the babies tossed into wells. *Watch* your brothers explode. *I want you there with me*" (73, emphasis added). A further significance of the fictional aspect of *What Is the What* is that in openly and expressly drawing together all of these genres, Eggers's text foregrounds and simultaneously internalizes the constructed nature of collaborative testimony. The fact, then, that these genres, most notably the novel and autobiography, can only coexist uneasily in this text and are "never comfortably integrated" (Siegel, 51) stresses the unsettled relationship between genres, truth, fiction, and indeed authorial voices in the narrative itself.

The myriad of implications as well as uncertainties that derive from *What Is the What*'s unique blending of genres impact on the voice and, by extension, the person with whom the reader enters into dialogue. One productive way of conceptualizing the vocal dilemma posed by the fictional voice of Valentino, who is neither Eggers nor Deng, would be to hear in *What Is the What* the elusive middle voice that Dominick LaCapra puts forward in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* as an appropriate way of representing historical traumas. The discussion of the middle voice—a linguistic category between the active and passive voices that exists in some languages such as Ancient Greek—has its roots in Roland Barthes's essay "To Write: An Intransitive Verb?" In that essay, Barthes discusses the middle voice of the verb "to write" as allowing the subject to both actively write and be affected by that which he or she has written (142). LaCapra's definition, however, comes out of his specific engagement with Hayden White's reconception of Barthes's notion of the middle voice in "Historical Emplotment and the Story of the Truth," which posits the middle voice as holding the means to represent the Holocaust in a way that eschews absolute certainty and ties reader and writer together in a process of understanding and meaning-making on the level of the text. In a similar vein, Rick Crownshaw has suggested in *The Future of Memory* that memory studies would be wise to focus on the middle voice as a means of

maintaining the distinctive nature of various subject positions in relation to trauma such as primary and secondary witness, while encouraging empathy between them (12–13). LaCapra himself describes it as being an “‘in-between’ voice of undecidability and the unavailability or radical ambivalence of clear-cut positions” (20). This description of the middle voice has two key implications for our analysis of Eggers and Deng’s collaborative testimony. First, while the contents of the narrative in *What Is the What* remain clear, its voice remains necessarily ambivalent to the reader (“undecidability”). Second, and consequently, as the victim’s voice meshes with that of the Western activist, the reader’s imaginative efforts are directed toward inhabiting the space of the narrative’s traumatic events without their being able to overidentify with the victim (“unavailability”). In this sense, the narrative voice testifies to both Deng’s lived experience and Eggers’s careful listening (Twitchell, 639) by finding the middle ground between primary and secondary witness. Returning to the question of genre, one might say that *What Is the What* invokes the type of contract Lejeune defines in order to secure the factual existence of its subject, while it also undermines that contract’s very premise by openly exploring the tension between fiction and autobiography alluded to by de Man as a means of drawing the reader into the act of recognizing and co-defining Deng.

It is precisely through this stylistic distortion that *What Is the What* creates for its readers the “empathic unsettlement” described by LaCapra, which guards against the reader’s appropriating the victim’s voice or victimhood. Empathic unsettlement, LaCapra posits, takes account of the necessarily transferential connection between the witness or victim and the reader (36),⁹ while warning against gratuitous identification (38) as well as against the integration of trauma into a “spiritually uplifting account of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance” (41–42). In other words, it entails empathy where the reader as an “attentive secondary witness [is put] in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place” (78). This form of empathy, which encourages identification while acknowledging distance, can be found symbolically in the narrative as “the collapsible space between us” (535) to which Valentino refers in his closing address to the reader. *What Is the What* neither appropriates nor erases Deng’s voice or identity precisely because of that intersubjectivity, the evoked readerly empathy

with the victim as a relationship between two independent human beings, and the dialogue established in a middle voice distinctive enough to be heard but so ambiguous that it cannot be purloined by Western readers or organizations. In this sense, the ambiguous authorial middle voice—Valentino’s—with which the reader can empathize but not overidentify, provides a possible answer to Gayatri Spivak’s famous question about the possibility of subaltern speech: how can the subaltern speak without privileged First World individuals’ humanitarian desire to represent the silenced subaltern effectively appropriating their voice and resiliencing them?

Considering the impact of voice and identity in another use of testimony in a humanitarian narrative—*Kony 2012*—will help us understand the added value of the way testimony in *What Is the What* encourages a guarded empathy between the privileged reader and the subaltern as an integral part of its humanitarian effort. Both narratives relate to Richard Rorty’s thesis in “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality” that “sad and sentimental stories” have the power to move Western readers to take action (185).¹⁰ However, what makes *Kony 2012* innovative—it explicitly labels itself an “experiment”—is its faith in new (social) media to tell its story and garner support. *Kony 2012*’s over one hundred million views on YouTube attest to its tremendous initial success in provoking interest, emotional responses, and support from the West for a distant crisis. Moreover, the video explicitly aligns its reliance on the Internet with the use of social media during the Arab Spring¹¹ as a way for protestors to reclaim their freedom of speech from repressive regimes. Additionally, considering Invisible Children’s aforementioned appeal to a shared humanity, one could say that *Kony 2012* attempts to expand the “epistemological frames” that determine which lives are recognized and are therefore grievable (Butler, 1–24) to encompass those affected by the LRA conflict. The implication and ambition is clear: in this video, through this medium, the subaltern’s voice can be heard and the West’s willful blindness to humanitarian tragedies such as the one surrounding the LRA can be challenged. Watching the video, however, one realizes that it is actually Russell whom one gets to know and who is granted a voice through this testimonial account, whereas the rehabilitating ex-child soldier, Acaye, plays a supporting and mostly silent role in the appeal, leaving him largely unknown to the audience. He is in fact spoken for and silenced in such

a way that his particular testimony does not survive Russell's use of it in *Kony 2012*. Therefore, despite its stated intent to incorporate those affected by the LRA into a shared humanity, Invisible Children does not represent Acaye in such a way as to allow the audience to understand his individual life as being recognizable and grievable. As a result, Acaye does not simply remain unknown to the viewer throughout the video, but the way in which he is represented actually makes him unknowable. Not only is the subaltern's voice appropriated and his identity erased, but the reader's emotional engagement with the subaltern subject also becomes problematic.

From the opening remarks and ideas, the video pans to an American maternity ward to introduce the viewer to the protagonist of the video: Jason Russell. It is from this point onward that the impact of the LRA in Uganda is explored through Russell's emotional account of his experiences there as well as his attempt at explaining the gravity of the situation to his son Gavin in simple terms a child can understand.¹² This causes the conflict to be set up with a "bad man" who needs capturing, focusing Invisible Children's humanitarian campaign message on a large-scale manhunt, which arguably draws attention away from the humanitarian mission in Uganda. Indeed, informed viewers aware of the fact that Kony no longer operates in that country—a point abundantly made by the campaign's many critics—may even feel a distinct lack of a sense of urgency for the crisis in Uganda. In terms of testimonial accounts, it is true that Acaye can be heard recounting some of his traumatic experiences. However, it is always Russell who prompts, frames, and gives meaning to Acaye's account within the wider context of Russell's own traumatic testimony of his experiences in conflict-ridden Uganda. The appropriation of the victim's position is so complete that Russell's testimony effectively becomes the sentimental and affectively charged story on which the campaign's appeal is based. Moreover, given the fact that Russell's and Acaye's first names are so similar, it becomes even easier for the audience to confuse the primary witness with the Western activist. LaCapra opposes such unrestrained overidentification, "to the point of making oneself a surrogate victim who has a right to the victim's voice or subject position" (78), to his notion of empathic unsettlement. Furthermore, the notion that Russell is the true victim in *Kony 2012* was fed by his very public emotional breakdown following the criticism of his

autobiographical testimony in the campaign video.¹³ Thus, whereas *What Is the What* never leaves any doubt over whose trauma it represents, *Kony 2012* falls prey to what Elizabeth Twitchell—reiterating LaCapra’s warning from a postcolonial perspective—calls “emotional imperialism,” where one takes “someone else’s traumatic experience as [one’s] own” (631).

The consequences of this appropriation of voice and victimhood for the viewer are twofold. First, the heterogeneity of those affected by the LRA becomes entirely irrelevant to Invisible Children’s effort to garner support for the fight against the LRA in Russell’s representation of it; Acaye comes to represent all victims, regardless of individual stories or identities. In the eyes of the viewer, the true victim is thus simply blurred into the tragic backdrop for Russell’s narrative. Spivak recognizes that such assumptions are commonly made by Western intellectuals, adding that “one must nevertheless insist that the colonized subaltern *subject* is irretrievably heterogeneous” (26). In this respect, it is important to remember that Deng and Eggers’s collaboration leaves the former’s individual and particular experiences at the center of the narrative. Second, and consequently, however, because it is Russell’s autobiographical account that feeds the privileged reader’s hunger “for intimacy and vicarious adventure” (Schaffer and Smith, 21) in *Kony 2012*, the Western activist becomes the only imaginable object of empathy, and Acaye—stripped of agency and merely part of the tragic background—can only hope to attract patronizing sympathy. At this point, it is worth considering the potential danger involved in human rights advocates representing others in a way that portrays them as a deprived collective rather than suffering individuals. Sympathy reinforces a charitable hierarchy between the privileged West and a reductively blurred group of impoverished Africans rather than promoting horizontal transnational connections based on the human rights–related idea of human equality. Indeed, the empathically unsettled connection with the true victim is crucial to the ethical relationship with the subaltern that, in LaCapra’s view, testimonial narrative should seek to establish—a point that is evinced by Victor Ochen’s attempt at reinserting the victim’s identity and perspective into the LRA debate following the release of *Kony 2012*. As director of a Ugandan NGO that works in support of the victims of the LRA conflict, Ochen wrote his article “A War Victim’s Opinion on Invisible Children’s KONY

2012" explicitly from the perspective of "a survivor, a young man born and raised in the midst of the LRA war," and stressed that "the more we are connected directly to the victims, the more real our support becomes." In other words, he effectively points out that human rights appeals must do more than simply inform the West of the dire state of the subaltern and forge an emotional connection between the individual reader and the rightful testimonial subject.

As opposed to the mutually defining relationship fostered by *What Is the What*, empathic unsettlement in *Kony 2012* is precluded by Russell's overidentification with Acaye's traumatic past; the collapsible space between the reader and the victim so cherished by Valentino has been filled with Russell's vicarious victimhood. Indeed, Eggers writes Deng's testimony in such a way that the reader's empathy is established on the basis of the recognition of the victim's right to a voice and identity championed by international human rights law.¹⁴ Moreover, as a warning against the type of problematic sympathy to which Acaye is consigned, Valentino narrates the story of his Sudanese past in parallel to the invasion of his home in the United States. This frame narrative forestalls any preconceived notions of Western society as a perfect safe haven. *What Is the What* fosters empathy between the reader and Valentino as individual human beings, rather than appealing to the stock image of the civilized West aiding troubled Africa. In contrast, *Kony 2012* reinforces the Westerner's privilege by fixing the subaltern in an inferior and helpless position as well as by reestablishing the West as a beneficial actor and haven. It is symptomatic of what the author Teju Cole has called "the White Savior Industrial Complex," which is clearly related to notions of condescending sympathy.¹⁵ Tying this complex to notions of privilege and misguided uplifting emotional experiences in "saving" victims, Cole tweeted on March 8, 2012, in response to *Kony 2012*: "The White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege." Cole's term was coined by analogy with the so-called Military Industrial Complex, which refers to the self-perpetuating and pernicious need to increase defense spending as a result of concerted lobby work by the arms industry, the military, and members of the political class. The "White Savior Industrial Complex" thus suggests that charitable organizations such as *Kony 2012* are part of a similarly self-serving system—Cole calls it "the fastest growth industry in the

US.” In relation to the campaign’s use of a testimonial narrative, this means that the victim’s story is made to fit the particular needs of the political economy of NGOs within which Invisible Children operates and that requires testimony to be formatted according to the privilege-validating emotional experience derided by Cole.

APPLICATIONS OF HUMAN RIGHTS DISCOURSE

Given that Russell is the protagonist and focus of *Kony 2012*, it is worth delving further into the underlying ideology to which this tale of a white man’s experiences in black Africa is indebted. Essentially, the story consists of a teleological narrative in which Russell’s blissfully ignorant past is violently disrupted by a foray into the dangerous and destitute African continent, after which he returns home to champion the rights of the poor victims he encountered there. The portrayal of Africa as a type of dangerous wilderness in which Western protagonists experience a formative struggle for survival is reminiscent of Chinua Achebe’s influential discussion of racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*: “The West seems to suffer deep anxieties about the precariousness of its civilization and to have a need for constant reassurance by comparison with Africa. . . . Africa is to Europe as the picture to Dorian Gray—a carrier onto whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate” (261). Russell’s struggle is portrayed in simple black-and-white terms, as he swoops in from the West to fight the evil Joseph Kony, explicitly referred to as number one on the ICC’s “most wanted” list, and to save those affected by the LRA, with “Africa [serving] as a backdrop for white fantasies of conquest and heroism” (Cole, 2).¹⁶ Such a racialized view of *Kony 2012* adds a new dimension to the obstruction of empathy in that it emphasizes the subaltern’s otherness and stresses the distinction between the West and Africa. Even though Invisible Children invokes the idea of a shared humanity, *Kony 2012*’s appeal actually stresses difference by focusing on Russell’s personal encounter with an unknowable other. We have already noted how the video allows the viewer to sympathize with the subaltern but restricts identification to the Western activist, Russell. As such, it is inward-looking, with a Western audience engaging with a Western protagonist. Nevertheless, as our analysis

of *What Is the What* has revealed, the encounter between the Western audience and the subaltern subject precluded by *Kony 2012* is paramount to recognizing the latter as an individual human being to whom empathy and rights can and should extend. Perhaps, however, this encounter, which would facilitate an empathically unsettled relationship between the viewer and the subaltern, is not so much missed as deliberately avoided by *Kony 2012* when it makes Russell the knowable protagonist and Acaye the unknowable passive victim. As a former child soldier in the LRA, Acaye poses what Maureen Moynagh calls “an impediment to the human rights model” that demands absolute innocence rather than the ambiguous mixture of victimhood and perpetratorship offered by (former) child soldiers (40–41). *Kony 2012* avoids this issue by making the audience identify with the humanitarian agent while limiting our view of Acaye to that of an entirely innocent but mute victim (43). The simplified version of a shared humanity on which *Kony 2012* relies cannot incorporate the ambiguity of Acaye’s position as a recovering child soldier. As a result, this type of testimony perpetuates widespread uses of human rights discourse that require the disenfranchised to be homogenized into a helpless group of passive victims rather than explore ways in which the inevitably complex nature of those affected by humanitarian crises can be incorporated into the definition of universal rights on which human rights discourses are based.

In addition to presenting a reductive image of the subaltern, however, *Kony 2012* also seeks to create a one-sided image of the United States as an unambiguously righteous actor as the campaign attempts to forge a unified response to the LRA. After merging the separate countries, communities, and people affected by the LRA together to form the helpless and inferior background for the appeal, the campaign video reminds American viewers of their morally satisfying intervention in the 1940s against Hitler and Nazi ideology. Paul Gilroy discusses the status of the fight against Nazism as an “ethnic myth” into which Western nations flee for its simplistic image of a war in which the purely good fought the purely evil, reminding them of a time when national culture felt more “comprehensible and habitable” (89). Playing to this myth, *Kony 2012* juxtaposes images of murdered Jews with LRA victims, a close-up of Adolf Hitler at a Nazi rally with a reminder of Joseph Kony’s top spot on the ICC’s “most wanted” list. American

viewers are united under the pretense of a unified past, and the LRA conflict—as well as the Second World War—is evacuated of all its complexity by simplistic comparisons. In relying so strongly on a homogenizing logic of the powerful and civilized United States and the powerless and uncivilized African continent, *Kony 2012* is heavily indebted to a neocolonial ideology.

In contrast, *What Is the What*, a first-person narrative exploring violations of Deng's human rights throughout his life, invokes human rights discourse in a less conventional and more challenging way. At the heart of this divergence lies Eggers's decision to constantly circle back from Deng's hardships in Sudan to the robbery in Atlanta. First, this circular narrative structure denies the possibility of narrative redemption, as has been variously noted by Peek (127) and Eaglestone (2008, 80). Second, Deng's experience of rejection and abuse in American society from the very start of the text shatters any notions of the West as an uncomplicated safe haven and beneficial actor. The reader is drawn into Deng's story of exclusion from American society by the narrative middle voice, which is positioned both in Sudan and in the United States as well as both in the past and in the present. From this ambivalent in-between position, Valentino is able to undermine the world view put forward by *Invisible Children* where the United States functions as an unblemished beacon for humanity. Moreover, had the narrative been constructed in such a way that the African victim developed in a traditional fashion from dismal destitution to inspiring inclusion, this would have implied, as *Kony 2012* does, that Africans live outside of civilization until white saviors rescue them. However, *What Is the What* explores ways of promoting international justice without enforcing a sympathetic charitable hierarchy. Thus, while Eggers's literary interventions—such as the narrative middle voice and the circular narrative structure—are crucial to providing readers with an identifiable protagonist to whom they feel human rights should extend, they are also an important challenge to preconceived notions of Western privilege and superiority in establishing those rights.

Apart from the general complication of the idea of the United States as a safe haven through the frame narrative of the Atlanta robbery, the homogenizing neocolonial ideology underlying *Kony 2012* is challenged further in Valentino's interaction with the two African American robbers, Powder and Tonya. Their dialogue provides an explicit challenge

to the stock image of Africa. Consider the following scene, in which Valentino is violently restrained by Powder:

“You’re from Africa, right?”

I nod.

“All right then. That means we’re brothers.”

I am unwilling to agree. (5)

Cynically referring to Valentino as “Africa” throughout the robbery, even as the reader is intermittently informed of his specific traumatic childhood in civil war-torn Sudan, explicitly denies the particularity of Deng’s story; his unwillingness to agree with Powder’s sarcastic suggestion that he is his brother constitutes a rejection of a simplistic pan-Africanism that denies the obvious differences between Powder’s life, however troubled, as a black United States citizen and Deng’s life as a Sudanese refugee relocated to Atlanta. Additionally, when it comes to the metonymic logic underlying traditional humanitarian testimonies, *What Is the What* once again self-consciously reflects on the problematic nature of the presumed similarity and universality of human suffering. The testimonial accounts of the so-called Lost Boys of Sudan— itself a unifying term imposed on heterogeneous victims of the Second Sudanese Civil War by the West—are repeatedly shown as unnaturally uniform narratives deliberately made to suit the demands of Western readers for the homogenizing type of human rights discourse prevalent in *Kony 2012*. Consider by way of example:

Along our walk from southern Sudan to Ethiopia, there were a handful of boys who drank their own urine, a few more who ate mud to keep their throats wet, but our experiences were very different, depending on when we crossed Sudan. . . . Even so, the tales of the Lost Boys have become remarkably similar over the years. . . . But we did not all see the same things. . . . Survivors tell the stories the sympathetic want, and that means making them as shocking as possible. (21)

Deepening the tension between reality and fiction foregrounded by *What Is the What*, Valentino goes on to admit that his “own story includes enough small embellishments that [he] cannot criticize the accounts of others” (21). By exposing the pressure exerted by the Western audience on the subaltern to sensationalize and harmonize their testimonies, *What Is the What* addresses the broader Sudanese issue in a way that honors the complexity of the individual victim’s experience

of that particular humanitarian crisis. Eggers's novel thus avoids slipping into the problematic use of human rights discourse that results in *Kony 2012* obscuring Acaye's ambiguous history as a child soldier by grouping him in a universal category of passive victims.

What Is the What also involves the issue of child soldiers more intricately in its narrative. In addition to offering descriptions of how desperate children joined the SPLA, either willingly or through coercion, Valentino explains that those "Lost Boys" who had escaped the rebel militia understood how their ambiguous histories as child soldiers would make it impossible for them to be considered for relocation to the United States by aid organizations (17). One could remark at this point that *What Is the What's* Valentino also tells his story in such a way that he is perceived as almost entirely innocent. However, *Kony 2012's* appeal relies very strongly on the uncomplicated innocence of the subaltern in order to comply with the type of rights discourse to which it subscribes, whereas *What Is the What* leaves room to accommodate the complex and ambiguous nature of several of Valentino's fellow "Lost Boys." Rather than feed the need for a victim's testimony to suit generalized and preconceived notions of childhood innocence, abject poverty, and Third World deprivation, Eggers and Deng's collaborative work tries to show the diversity of traumatic experience and challenges the reader to engage and empathize with a particular embodiment of such an experience.

What Is the What goes on to question the ethnic myth described by Gilroy that *Kony 2012* uses to homogenize the West by reflecting on the absurdity of oversimplified comparisons between past wars and present-day interventions in Africa. When a humanitarian organization decides to do a head count in the refugee camp of Kakuma—constructing fences to ensure an accurate and orderly procedure—various tribal leaders and other prominent figures suspect the aid workers are in fact building a Nazi-style death camp: "The more pressing and widespread fear among young and old at Kakuma was that the census would be a way for the UN to kill us all. . . . Most of the Sudanese my age had learned of the Holocaust, and were convinced that this was a plan much like that used to eliminate the Jews in Germany and Poland" (385). Valentino, skeptical of this exaggerated fear, not only reveals the absurdity of comparing the situation in the camp to that of 1940s Europe but also explains how the reason for this ill-conceived

comparison lies in their ignorance concerning Jewish culture: “Most of the boys I knew thought the Jews were an extinct race. . . . in church we had been taught rather crudely that the Jews had aided in the killing of Jesus Christ” (386). By witnessing the misconceptions rampant among the refugees concerning Jewish history, the readers are made to question the flimsy basis on which they themselves so often judge African matters. Rather than appeal to stock images of both the West and Africa to further its cause, *What Is the What* encourages transcultural empathy on the basis of a nuanced and critical perspective that counteracts the type of homogeneity in *Invisible Children’s* account. As such, it tries to undermine the homogenizing neocolonial assumptions that have been internalized by the West in its prompting, presenting, and reading of subaltern testimonies.

In conclusion, it is worth referring this discussion of human rights discourse back to the importance of voice and identity in humanitarian testimony. *Kony 2012* and *What Is the What* share the belief that a personal testimonial account can help galvanize support from a privileged Western audience for disenfranchised victims of various human rights violations across the African continent. However, the critical point has been to consider the underlying assumptions and wider effects of the form in which that testimony is presented. Our analysis of *Kony 2012* has shown how advocating human rights by appropriating the subaltern’s testimony leads to a use of human rights discourse that reinforces colonial power relations, strengthens the West’s sense of privilege and superiority, and blurs the disenfranchised into a homogeneous object of patronizing sympathy. As a campaign, it establishes a dependent charitable relationship in which the superior First World gives to the inferior Third World within a narrative that erases the disenfranchised and places them firmly outside of the hegemony. In this way, *Invisible Children* perpetuates the rigid framework within which NGOs operate, which demands that victims’ testimonies be framed and presented to conform with preconceived notions of child-victimhood, Third World degradation, and First World charity. *What Is the What*, on the other hand, maintains an awareness of these problematic issues throughout, in terms of both form and content. It explicitly deals with the potentially problematic nature of a collaborative testimony between a privileged Western author and a disenfranchised Sudanese victim by first ceding control to the victim in the preface before presenting a

testimonial narrative in a middle voice that neither mutes the victim nor allows the reader to appropriate his victimhood. Moreover, *What Is the What* reinstates the heterogeneity of the otherwise uniform “Lost Boy” narratives, focusing on the particularity of Deng’s story, while drawing attention to a broader human rights issue. It challenges its Western readers to unlearn their privilege and identify with a specific subaltern to whom empathy can be extended without their experiences being appropriated. Thus, it decolonizes traditional uses of testimony in order to extend human rights on equal terms rather than within charitable hierarchies.

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Notes

1. This article focuses primarily on the first *Kony 2012* video, which was posted on YouTube on March 5, 2012, rather than the other videos posted by Invisible Children as part of their campaign against Kony. After all, the initial *Kony 2012* video had the widest impact by far, currently standing at over one hundred million views, whereas other video messages posted by Invisible Children have only garnered a small fraction of that initial interest. Moreover, as the implications of the narrative structure, invoked tropes, and text-reader / viewer relationship make up the main focus of this article, it is more productive for our purposes to analyze in detail the use of testimony in this particular video than to consider the broader impact of Invisible Children in terms of funds raised or specific humanitarian aid provided in Central Africa.

2. Unless explicitly stated otherwise, quotations from the preface are taken from this second edition of *What Is the What*, published by Vintage in 2007.

3. All quotations from *What Is the What* are taken from the 2008 Penguin edition.

4. This focus on Uganda has been widely criticized, most notably perhaps by the country’s prime minister, Amama Mbabazi. As Laura Edmondson explains in “Uganda Is Too Sexy: Reflections on *Kony 2012*,” Mbabazi primarily blamed *Kony*

2012 for glossing over the fact “that the LRA is no longer in Uganda” (13). A report in the *Africa Research Bulletin* similarly noted that “criticisms [of *Kony 2012*] included: implying that Joseph Kony and the LRA were still operating in Uganda (which they are not), implying that the LRA is still a large organization (which it is not), [and] stating that Kony and the LRA were objectively worse than other similar actors in the region” (“Uganda: Kony 2012,” 19208).

5. *What Is the What* and *Kony 2012* are linked in a geopolitical sense too, in that at the time of the Second Sudanese Civil War the LRA roamed between Uganda, the Central African Republic, and the countries now known as the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan. Indeed, *What Is the What* describes how some of those seeking refuge in the humanitarian aid camp of Kakuma were in fact former LRA recruits who had fled captivity, and points out that most of the Ugandans in the camp were “affiliated with Joseph Kony’s Lord’s Resistance Army. . . . The Ugandans couldn’t go back; most were well known at home and had prices on their heads” (388).

6. The rise of the *testimonio* genre in recent decades has received some scholarly attention, particularly concerning the veracity of testimony, most notably from John Beverley (*Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth*) and Doris Sommer (*Proceed with Caution, When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas*). The main impetus for studying testimonial narratives, however, was the Holocaust testimony movement. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* takes a psychoanalytical perspective in studying the process of witnessing in reading and writing Holocaust testimony. Lawrence Langer’s *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* focuses on how testimonies mediate the way in which history remembers and understands the Holocaust. LaCapra’s seminal work on empathic unsettlement, about which we will have more to say later, largely grew out of this sustained attention to Holocaust testimony begun in the 1980s. Additionally, in *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, Robert Eaglestone points out that postmodern literature’s tendency to stress the “limits and processes of rationality” (2004, 3) through formal and stylistic experiments interweaves with the ethical impossibility of straightforwardly representing the horror of the Holocaust and disrupts the “process of identification” (43). While the—by his own admission, nonexhaustive—taxonomy of postmodern tropes he analyzes convincingly makes that point, the particular narrative devices we discuss here in Eggers’s *What Is the What* are neither specifically postmodern nor do they fall into the categories set out by Eaglestone.

7. In the revised preface, Deng explicitly refers to *What Is the What* as a way for “the world to know the whole truth of [his] existence” (xiii); both prefaces contain the aforementioned assurance that the work is “the soulful account of [his] life” (xiii).

8. The original preface makes the same point in a somewhat blunter fashion: “Because many of the passages are fictional, the result is called a novel” (Deng 2006, 6).

9. LaCapra imports the term “transference” from psychoanalysis and uses it to mean the unavoidable and even to a certain extent desirable “implication of the observer in the observed” (36).

10. See also Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith's similar point that sensationalized stories charged with affect are an effective means of gathering support for humanitarian issues (14–15).

11. The voice-over does not explicitly mention this, but images of protest during the Arab Spring intersecting with on-screen Facebook messages mentioning protests in the Arab world (one of these reads "protesters in Tahrir are not going home") make the reference abundantly clear.

12. This approach partly accounts for the criticism that *Kony 2012* glosses over the complex political, military, and jurisprudential reality of the LRA conflict. Briefly and by way of example, *Kony 2012*'s strong reliance on Kony's position on the ICC's "most wanted" list ignores the precarious position of the ICC in Africa, as well as the related and problematic situation where Kony has been served with an arrest warrant while other crucial actors in the conflict, such as the Ugandan government and army, have not (Glasius, 496–520), despite their involvement in the "killings and the brutal treatment" of their own people (Peskin, 678).

13. For details about Russell's breakdown, see Matt Williams's article in *The Guardian* titled "Kony 2012 Campaigner Jason Russell: 'I wasn't in control of my mind or body.'"

14. In "A Question of Narration: The Voice in International Human Rights Law," Joseph Slaughter elaborates on international human rights law's commitment to an individual's ability to have his or her voice heard as a crucially constitutive element of a human being's subjectivity (429). In this discourse, Slaughter argues, "human rights abuse is characterized as an infringement on the modern subject's ability to narrate her story" (413).

15. The term also serves as the title of an article Cole wrote for the *Atlantic* following a series of tweets he made in response to *Kony 2012*.

16. This hierarchical list of the ICC's most sought-after criminals, which is supposed to be topped by Kony, is somewhat dubious in that there seems to be no official record of it.

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